

Barriers to Student Voting

In the last presidential election, about 37 percent of citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 voted, a sharp decline from 1972, when more than half did. The relatively low participation rate of young people is often attributed to apathy or the distraction of other things in their lives. But a lack of support, and sometimes outright hostility, from elections officials is a significant factor. With issues like the Iraq war and budget deficits that could last for decades in the forefront of the presidential campaign, young people have more reason than ever to fight for their right to vote — and to cast their ballots on Nov. 2.

It is nice to think that elections officials want to do everything they can to help young voters. But the truth is, many cities and towns with colleges and universities regard student voters — who are more transient than the average resident, and whose political views also may be different — as a challenge to the established order. As a result, local elections officials often discourage students from registering and voting from their campus addresses, even though the Supreme Court has ruled that they have the right to do so.

In Texas this year, a county district attorney threatened to prosecute students from Prairie View A&M University if they tried to register. The students had to file a lawsuit before he withdrew the threat and apologized. A student at Hamilton College in Utica, N.Y., was told that he was not a "permanent resident" and had to vote from his parents' home in another state. And a Fox affiliate in Tucson recently carried a report quoting an elections official who warned, falsely, that University of Arizona students who registered from their dorms might be committing a felony.

Even when they are not actively discouraging

young voters, election officials are often unwilling to take steps to make it easier for them to vote. They often resist appeals to put polling places on campus, one of the best ways to make students feel included in the electoral process. And they devote too few resources to registration drives among students, whose rapid turnover makes them a group that requires special attention.

College and university administrators also bear some of the blame. Under the Higher Education Act of 1998, colleges and universities receiving federal funds must make a good-faith effort to distribute voter registration forms to every student, and to make those forms widely available on campus. But a newly released study by Harvard University's Institute of Politics and the Chronicle of Higher Education found that fewer than 17 percent of schools are in full compliance, and one-third are not even making minimal efforts.

An array of public-minded groups, like the New Voters Project, Declare Yourself and Rock the Vote, are working this year to register and mobilize young voters. Their efforts are much needed, and they appear to be paying off. The nonpartisan New Voters Project says it has already registered more than 122,000 young voters in Wisconsin, where the margin of victory in the 2000 presidential race was fewer than 6,000 votes. But these groups are reporting that elections offices in several states have a large backlog of registrations to process. These offices should immediately hire temporary workers, if necessary, to ensure that everyone who met the registration deadline is on the voting rolls by Nov. 2.

Grass-roots efforts like the New Voters Project are important, but reaching out to young voters should not be left to volunteers. Elections officials and institutions of higher education must do more to remove the barriers that still too often stand between young people and the ballot box.



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